



McGill

Department of Art History and
Communication Studies
McGill University
Arts Building, W-255
853 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal, QC, Canada H3A 0G5

Département d'histoire de l'art et
d'études en communication
Université McGill
Pavillon des arts, W-225
853, rue Sherbrooke ouest
Montréal, QC, Canada H3A 0G5

Tel. : (514) 398-6541
Fax: (514) 398-7247
E-mail: ahcs@mcgill.ca

July 2, 2020

Re: Dismissal of President Aoife MacNamara

Dear Ms. Louise Anne Comeau (Chair of NSCAD Board),

We have not yet met in person, but I have been newly appointed as a Tier I Canada Research Chair to NSCAD and will be in charge of the creation of the new Institute for the Study of Canadian Slavery, the first such research centre in the nation. I have also been asked to act as the faculty representative on the Board of Governors. Therefore, it is in these two capacities, a concerned faculty member and a future member of the NSCAD Board, that I am contacting you.

Like many other NSCAD constituents, I was alarmed by the abrupt dismissal of President MacNamara. The way in which she was dismissed, apparently without warning or open communication of your issues with her work and leadership, was disrespectful of her as an individual and of her role as the head administrator of the university which the board claims to serve and govern. Furthermore, your exploitation of the in-camera session served to create a lack of transparency that only increased the anxiety of the university community which, alongside President MacNamara, were clearly blindsided by your decision. Frankly, your lack of transparency, refusal to consult and the ongoing lack of information and clarification about your decision-making process is opening up a gulf between the board and NSCAD's constituents, the faculty and staff who do the work and the students and alumni that we have and will continue to serve.

As you well know, we are in the midst of multiple and intersecting crises, each unprecedented. The coronavirus pandemic has provoked great strain on university staff and faculty as we have scrambled to deliver courses and services to our students while supporting students' increased financial, relocation, academic, and mental health needs. Above and beyond their normal duties, NSCAD faculty have had to be trained or retrained on online learning platforms to deliver fine arts content virtually – no small feat! The pandemic also exposed the prolific racism of our medical and healthcare systems as we witness the disproportionate detrimental impacts of coronavirus illness and death on black and other people of colour communities. At the same time, the murder of Mr. George Floyd at the hands of four Minneapolis Police has sparked global protests against anti-black and anti-indigenous racism and

police brutality. With less than one year on the job, President MacNamara has had to deal with and facilitate university responses to all of these crises and she has done so admirably, her public statement on Mr. Floyd's death going far beyond the trite, business-as-usual, standardized statements routinely issued by most Canadian universities which clearly intend to deal only in platitudes. President MacNamara has been exceptional in her support for the communities who are most endangered by these crises and as such, she has put NSCAD on the Canadian and international map as an institution of higher learning which actually intends to live its stated principles of diversity and inclusion – something which most Canadian institutions do not do and which their leadership has no intention of doing.

I implore you to reverse your decision immediately. Your decision to fire President MacNamara and the unprofessional and opaque way in which it was done sends a message to the university community that the board is prepared to act in the dark, to conceal its decision-making processes, and to inflict reputational, educational, and potential financial harms on the university. It sends the message that the board does not understand, nor does it care about the unprecedented weight of the multiple crises under which the university's staff and faculty are labouring. It sends the message that the board did not take into consideration the strain of their unanticipated decision on NSCAD's current and future students. Whether intentional or not, the board's decisions appears to be not merely an attack on President MacNamara, but an attack on the greater racial inclusiveness and anti-racist principles that she so courageously championed. How exactly do you think this makes the most vulnerable of NSCAD's constituents feel?

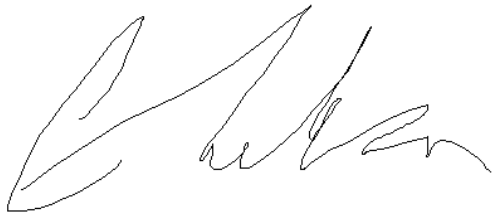
As you can imagine, after spending seventeen years of my career at McGill University, it took some convincing for me to make the decision to move to NSCAD. As a black female professor and the only black art historian in a tenured or tenure-track position at a Canadian University, McGill has not been an easy ride for me; indeed no Canadian university is an easy ride for black faculty. However, as many people believe, it's better to stick with the devil you know. President MacNamara's leadership was one of the key reasons that I decided to accept NSCAD's offer and join the NSCAD community. Specifically, her clear vision and devotion to transforming NSCAD into a space that more directly attracts, recruits, retains, and supports black, indigenous, and people of colour constituents, convinced me that I might finally find a supportive academic environment.

In pulling the rug out from under President MacNamara, you have also done so to me and, falsely or not, sent a message that she is being removed for the strides that she is taking to create an anti-racist university. The reputational damage of the fallout of the board's hasty decision - for the board and the university- must not be underestimated. Precisely which esteemed professors and upper administrators does the board expect to attract, recruit, and retain in the aftermath of this very public debacle? You have sent a message that: 1) you do not consult with the community or even the individual involved on major decisions like dismissals and (2) that presidents can and will be fired without cause - or at least without a clear public delineation thereof. Like it or not, the timing of your actions also gives the very dangerous impression that

the board is not only completely detached from, but callous towards, the NSCAD community and the compounded set of crises which, if unchecked, will result in unparalleled strain and harm.

Like many of my NSCAD colleagues, students, and alumni, I call upon you and the board to immediately reverse your decision and to reinstate President MacNamara. We need her visionary and compassionate leadership more than ever at this moment. In reinstating President MacNamara, the board will also restore its own reputation as a body which is not serving its own secretive agenda, but one that is in place to serve and to act in the best interests of the NSCAD community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Nelson', with a large, sweeping initial 'C'.

Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson

Professor of Art History

charmaine.nelson@mcgill.ca

Tier I Canada Research Chair: Transatlantic Black Diasporic Art and Community Engagement

NSCAD University

cnelson@nscad.ca

cc: Sean Kelly, Vice Chair of the Board (NSCAD); Hon. Stephen McNeil, Premier of Nova Scotia; Hon. Labi Kasoulis, Minister of Labour and Advanced Education; Hon. Leo Glavine, Minister of Communities, Culture, and Heritage; Hon. Tony Ince, Minister of African Nova Scotian Affairs and Public Service Commission; Hon. Justin Huston, Chief Executive Officer of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs and Deputy Minister of Communities, Culture, and Heritage